YOU DON'T BELIEVE IN PREDESTINATION, DO YOU?

November 8, 1992
8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture: John 15:12-17; Romans 8:28-30

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God..."
Romans 8:28 (NRSV)

In his memoir, William Sloane Coffin remembers a day when his spiritual journey took a sharp turn. After a distinguished career in Army Intelligence at the end of World War II, Coffin enrolled in Yale and decided, as was fashionable, to dispense with the idea of God and to cast his lot with the popular French existentialists, Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

He recalls:

> "Every time I was ready once and for all to deny the existence of God, to throw in my lot with Camus, at such moments I would always have an unsettling experience which would start me wondering all over again. One in particular I remember. In my senior year a good friend was killed in an automobile accident. Sitting in Dwight Chapel waiting for the funeral to begin, I was filled with angry thoughts. My friend's death seemed to be one more bit of evidence to prove the fatuousness of believing in an all-powerful, all-loving God when, as any sensitive person could see, the entire surface of the earth was soaked with the blood and tears of the innocent. Maliciously, I had noted outside that the priest had a typically soft face over his hard collar. Now as he started down the aisle toward the altar he began to intone unctuously Job's famous words: 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away: blessed be the name of the Lord.' From the aisle seat where I was sitting, I could have stuck out my foot and tripped him up, and might easily have done so, had my attention not been arrested by a still, small voice, as it were, asking, 'Coffin, what part of that sentence are you objecting to?' Naturally I thought it was the second part, 'the Lord hath taken away,' spoken all too facilely by the priest. But suddenly I realized it was the first. Suddenly I caught the full impact of 'The Lord gave'; the world, very simply, is not ours, at best we're guests. It was not an understanding I relished, nor one certainly to clear up my objections to my friend's death. But as I sat quietly now at his funeral, I realized that it was probably the understanding against which all the spears of human pride had to be hurled and shattered." [*Once to Every Man*, p. 82, 83]

Always the precipitating event is the injustice of premature death. In every age, in every station it is the unexpected and unnecessary and apparently random reality of human suffering which provokes the theological and personal crisis. How can you believe in a powerful and loving God in a world like this?

Coal Black Hair
14yr. old stops believing

Lewis Smedes flew to the bedside of one of his oldest and dearest friends who was dying. As he left the hospital room, his friend lifted his head, smiled weakly, and said, "It's all right." Smedes never saw him again and reflects: "How can anyone really believe that it's all right when everything is hopelessly wrong? His words have haunted me ever since and have become for me a metaphor of life's deepest question." [*How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?* p. 15]

It doesn't take a Ph.D. in philosophy to know what the question is.

Is it possible to believe in a loving God in the face of human suffering? Or, to put it a little more confrontationaly, if suffering is God's will, then God isn't good by any definition of the word good. And if suffering is not God's will, God is not God by the traditional definition of the word God.

How, Emil Brunner (who was a superb theologian) asked can we grasp the "impenetrable mystery" of God's relationship to the creation? [*The Letter to the Romans*]

The great philosophic quandary is ultimately practical. It is not, "does God exist?" but "does it matter?" And it is ultimately personal. "Does it have anything to do with my life... my hopes... my loved ones?"

One who pondered the dilemma and asked the question was St. Paul. You think a lot about these things as you get older. Paul was no exception. Near the end of his life he was summarizing his experience and his faith in a letter which would serve as his introduction to the Christian community in Rome. Paul was coming to Rome as a prisoner, and he knew that he might die there. And in what we call the eighth chapter of that letter to the Romans he wrote so powerfully and magnificently about suffering and hope and grace and love, that it is one of the high points in the literature of religion. Like great art, a Beethoven Symphony for instance, which you know and love and have heard hundreds of times and which is, in a sense, always new because every time you hear it you notice something more and you respond in wholly different ways - so it is with Romans 8.

- "The sufferings of the present are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed."
- "The whole creation waits eagerly, groaning in labor at the birth of redemption."
- "The spirit in us, sighs with sighs too deep for words."

And at the end — words without which no funeral or memorial or committal would be complete...

- "Nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And in the middle, this:

- "We know that all things work together for good, for those who love God, for those he predestined."

Paul believed absolutely and radically that his ultimate hope was in God's love, and his final destiny in God's hands. As he looked back on his own life he could see, in retrospect, God leading him... particularly in the matter of his becoming a believer, a follower of Jesus. Paul was absolutely convinced that his seeing the light, his coming to the truth about God revealed in Jesus Christ, was totally God's doing. All he, Paul, had done was receive the gift given to him.

All is grace, Paul wrote. What is important above all is not our decision to love God and to be faithful to God, but long before that God's decision to love us, to love and redeem and save the whole creation. He wasn't sentimental about it. It wasn't just "God and me, walking in the garden" for Paul. He thought cosmically - "the whole creation waits - the whole creation will be redeemed, the ultimate future of all - is in God's hands." So, therefore, nothing that happens to the world, or to us personally can upset the final triumph of God's love.

Paul leads us into deep water and many decline to follow. A notion of a love like that is more expansive than we can comprehend - or want to comprehend. We have a need to circumscribe God's grace apparently. It is part of our religiosity to draw a line in the sand between those who are in and those who are out, the saved and the damned, those headed for heaven and those condemned to hell. The notion that ultimately there is no line, that as one New Testament scholar put it, "all will eventually be rescued; all resistance to God's reconciling purpose will ultimately be overcome: that God's love will finally have its way throughout the whole created universe," [John Knox, *Life in Christ Jesus,* p. 111-118] is simply more than we can or want to deal with intellectually and emotionally. So we call it pejorative names like "Universalism," but every great theologian who ever read and pondered what Paul is proposing has, at least, taken it very seriously.

Paul employed a peculiar word to describe his radical but very personal conviction. He called it "Predestination," and what he meant was that God has made a decision to redeem the creation, and in the process to love you into eternity and God, being God, will not allow you ultimately to botch the job. God will, he wrote, "work for good in all things."

Our forbearers, the Calvinists, picked up on the topic. Salvation, Calvin and Luther taught, is a gift given to undeserving sinners. It is not a prize to be earned and it certainly is not the private property of clergy, the church, or the theologians to dispense as they please. If we are saved, it's because God planned it, predestined it, they concluded. And so we Presbyterians have been saddled with predestination. The trouble is, the predestination with which we are identified is not predestination at all, but determinism, or fatalism. That is the notion to which a lot of people seem to subscribe, that whatever happens was supposed to happen; that there is a master script somewhere and your life is simply a matter of playing out the plot and all the lines. When your number is up, it's up... the popular philosophy has it, "Que sera sera" - whatever will be will be.... Theologically, it is the notion that whatever happens is in some way the will and work of God. It is in a strange way, comforting to believe that if it happened God willed it.

The early Calvinists moved from a theology of grace to grim determinism. They believed and taught that God has chosen to save some and damn some and there isn't a whole lot you can do about it. They also taught that whatever happens to you is part of God's plan for your life. There is a wonderful old story about a Scottish Calvinist preacher who climbed up the steep stairs to his pulpit, stumbled on the top step and fell all the way back down in a heap. Standing up and smoothing his robes he said, "I'm certainly glad that's over."

The trouble with fatalism or determinism is that it's not only about stumbling and falling or unexpectedly meeting a long- lost friend, it must include all suffering, airplane crashes, the overnight fire that claims the lives of sleeping children, the wars, famines, AIDS and the Holocaust. You know the litany.

Determinism is a morally repugnant idea. God does not will human suffering. If the God we mean is the one present in the life of Jesus, then there is no question that God's will, God's intent, is not pain and tragedy, but health, wholeness, joy and laughter. "It is not the will of God that one of these little ones should perish," he said one time.

What Paul said was, "All things work for good for those who love God," or as one variant translates it, "In all things God works for good."

That is a very different proposition from the notion that God wills and causes everything that happens. That God works in everything for good is a confession of faith. It is Paul looking back on his own life and acknowledging in retrospect that God had been present all along: pushing, prodding, disturbing, raising questions and doubts and finally, one day, knocking Paul down in order to get his attention.

"In everything God works for good." It is the intriguing suggestion that God can work even in tragic events; that God can use and transform whatever happens. It is the conviction that God is not the determiner of every event, but a party to, a participant in, a potentially creative and redemptive and loving power which is present in everything that happens.

It's safer to intellectualize it, keep it safely distant: talk about wars and famines. But it is always personal finally. And it always comes back to our own spirits, our own spiritual journeys, our own unlikely coming to faith.

Gerald May calls his own final coming to faith a "mystical courtship" God was conducting in his life. And Frederick Buechner who has written so eloquently and hopefully about his own journey:

> "If God speaks to us at all, it is into our personal lives...incident following incident, helter- skelter, leading apparently nowhere, but then once in a while, there is the suggestion of purpose, meaning, direction, the suggestion of plot, the suggestion that however clumsily, your life is trying to tell you something, take you somewhere." [*The Alphabet of Grace,* p. 10]

So the invitation is to forget about the sweep of history for a moment and look at your own life as the place where God has been working for good. I don't suppose there are many of us who have not experienced hope in the aftermath of disappointment; what seemed like the end of the road actually becoming a new and more appropriate road. Theological modesty and personal reticence prevents most of us from talking about it, but most of us, I think, know because we have experienced it, that when a door closes for us, another one opens. And we know that in God's providence, even those experiences which are unbelievably painful, even the loss of our dearest ones, become occasions of growth and depth and enrichment. "In all things God works for good."

God does not will suffering. God did not plan the car accident that resulted in the death of Bill Coffin's friend. God does not will the malignancy, your unexpected unemployment, or the famine in Somalia.

But God can, we believe, enter into and transform tragedy and suffering; can use even the worst that can happen to us for redemptive and creative purposes.

"All things work together for good for those who love God." The key is that final condition "for those who love God." That's the theme of this great symphony that I heard for the first time.

God's creative and redemptive presence in the darkest, most tragic events, needs men and women who love God, who are open and responsive to God's love... men and women who are moved by God's love to enter more deeply than ever into the very events which are so dark and tragic.

God can transform any event into an occasion of grace and hope and love. Are you brave enough to believe even that?

Can you imagine a God of love who weeps in anger and grief at a child's innocent death, and then goes to work in the hearts and spirits and minds of people who love? Is it presumptuous to suggest that one of the results of Dantrell Davis' tragic death which God surely did not plan and surely grieves... that one of the results is a significant outpouring of rage and impatience and determination to change the system which produced the tragedy of his life and death? Is it theologically presumptuous to see God working for good when 1,500 people call this church to volunteer to help, and 600 hundred come to a meeting and sign up for all sorts of helpful projects throughout our city, tutoring, feeding, clothing, housing, advocating, teaching, loving? Is it presumptuous to see the love and determination and redemption and hope that will result from that - as a memorial to Dantrell Davis and a sign that God, as St. Paul suspected, is in all things working for good?

Are you expansive enough and joyful enough, and brave enough to believe that?

And beyond that will you affirm and embrace, and with tears of joy look back in wonder at God's redemptive presence in your life, and forward in confidence to the promise that God will continue to work for good in your life, will continue to surround you with love and grace in all of your days?

At the end of Norman MacLean's wonderful story, *A River Runs Through It,* the author, an old man, has told the story of his family, as his father years before had asked him to do.

They are all gone now... and as he stands in the river fishing, as he has done so many times with his father and brothers, he reflects:

> "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over the rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless rain drops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are these, 'I am haunted by waters.'"

About that singular day in the future, T. S. Eliot wrote:

> "In my end is my beginning."
> [*Four Quartets. East Coker*]

Will you be brave enough to believe even that, to live in that confidence, to let go, finally of the fear and anxiety which hems us in, and inhibits our joy, and live as those who are ultimately safe in God's grace and love?

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God."

And, we know that nothing in all of creation will separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.